
The human right to water

On 28 July, the United Nations General Assembly declared “the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights.” (1)

This comes as a surprise; not because the resolution was adopted, but because it means that until now access to safe and clean drinking water had NOT been recognized as one of the most basic rights of every single human being!

Having said the above, we of course welcome this declaration, that we consider an important milestone for addressing the problems currently being faced by almost 900 million people worldwide, that do not have access to clean water –and many more that might be facing the same fate in the near future.

We also welcome the fact that the resolution calls upon States and international organizations “to scale up efforts to provide safe, clean, **accessible** and **affordable** drinking water and sanitation for all.”

A third reason for welcoming this declaration is because it opens up the doors for a much needed debate on a series of crucial issues, ranging from property over water to measures for ensuring that water remains safe, clean, accessible and affordable.

Regarding property over water, the most obvious issue appears to be that of the incompatibility of water as a basic human right and its appropriation by private companies for making profits. For most people, the struggle is therefore focused against the privatization of drinking water and for its devolution to or maintenance in state-owned companies.

Although we agree with the above, there are other less visible forms of appropriation that we would like to focus on, that are linked with several of our areas of work.

The first issue is that of the major role that forests play in the conservation of the water cycle. When large areas of forests are destroyed through industrial logging or conversion to large-scale agriculture/cattle raising, this impacts on the entire water regime –from changes in rainfall patterns to siltation of water courses- which results in diminished water availability and quality. Forest destruction can therefore be also seen as a means of appropriation -through destruction- of water.

Another hidden means of appropriation of water is that of activities that pollute water resources such as mining, oil exploitation and industrial agriculture. The chemicals used in or released by those activities deprive local communities of their until then safe and clean drinking water. For them, their water has been appropriated by those polluters.

A more direct form of appropriation is that of large-scale fast-growth tree plantations, that consume millions of litres of water on a daily basis, depriving local and downriver users of their water

requirements.

The above few examples show that scaling up efforts to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water is not only a matter of providing “financial resources, capacity-building and technology transfer, through international assistance and cooperation, in particular to developing countries” (as expressed in the UN resolution’s article 2). Though necessary, such actions are not sufficient.

In the long run, what matters most is to address the causes of water depletion and pollution and to prioritize water conservation –in quantity and quality- in all economic investments. Which means that any activity that either depletes or pollutes water resources should no longer be acceptable.

Given that the right to safe and clean drinking water has at last been recognized as a “human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights,” citizens now have the right and governments the obligation to make it come true.

(1) The resolution received 122 votes in favour and zero votes against, while 41 countries abstained from voting. Those that abstained were: Armenia, Australia, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Ethiopia, Greece, Guyana, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Latvia, Lesotho, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United Republic of Tanzania, United States, Zambia.